

Random Thursday nights by OrangeLovePerson

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Summary: It's summer, 1985: Nancy thinks about her future, El keeps learning new words, Jonathan gets to listen to a really good song and Mike is still the world's greatest Dungeon master. (One-shot, and probably a bit all over the place, but oh well...)

Random Thursday nights

A.T.: Hi guys!

I have to apologise at this point for my complete lack of D&D knowledge. I only played Dungeons and Drangons twice so far, and I don't seem to be really good at it, so it's possible that what I'm writing about the kids' game actually doesn't match with the rules, or something. ^^ Oh, also, I'm sorry for any writing errors or other slips. :) Have a nice week!

Her eyes went wide like Hopper's pleased smirk did whenever he found a forgotten package of cigarettes somewhere between the couch cushions. Only in El's case, her expression wasn't sign of some sort of elation, but one of fear.

"The Githzerai is moving closer, Dustin! What are you going to do?", Mike exclaimed, staring around their party with a deathly serious gleam in his dark eyes. Everyone's fingers twitched and thumbed on the table's board game-covered surface. This was getting real! One wrong move and the game could be over for each of them!

"I use my shield to cover up the gap!"

Mike threw the dice, quickly making notes on his writing pad afterwards. "You succeed! Lucas, your turn!"

"I take the silver coins with me as I jump on Dustin's shield."

Another rolling die. "Alright, you made it over there, you can approach the big gate next time."

Lucas threw a fist in the air "Cool!", he grinned, taking another sip of his soda.

El wondered if there were even any bubbles left in Lucas' drink. He'd been moving his straw around so much, earlier! She'd decided that she liked that sort of nervous habit, though – moving your straw around too much was not as bad as biting your fingernails when things got scary, or something. El knew from television that biting

your fingernails was not a really good thing to do, but no one on television ever complained about people who used their straws wrong when drinking things.

Then again, she'd also learned from television that smoking was bad, and Hopper – who was a policeman and really clever, as far as El was concerned – did smoke, anyway. Such rules could be weird sometimes.

"Max, you're still sitting next to the wounded snake. What are you doing next?", Mike asked, keeping up the dramatic, urged voice he always used when their enemies got closer. The way Mike described the monsters from *Dungeons and Dragons* was always so scary, it almost felt like they were actually in the room with their little group.

"I jump on the shield, too.", Max shrugged, not quite as caught up in the atmosphere of their game as the others.

Mike shook his head while throwing the dice. "It doesn't work.", he then explained. "You break the shield and fall into the trap. You're seriously injured and in pain, awaiting your companions' help."

"What the freaking hell?", Max shouted, angrily, while Dustin complained about his broken shield at the same time. "Why didn't it work? Lucas had no problem stepping on the shield! Are shields that weak, all of the sudden?"

Will chuckled silently next to El, and something about the sound made her giggle, too. She quickly averted her gaze, however, when Max glared in their direction.

"Lucas' chances to successfully jump on the shield were far better than yours, Max.", Mike commented, matter-of-factly. "His character is smaller, lighter and more maneuverable than yours, remember?"

"Oh, so just because I'm awesome at ripping people's throats out means I can't jump on a fucking shield, Wheeler?", Max lamented, annoyed.

Mike sighed, but smiled in Will's direction. "Will, are you going to use your last healing potion in order to help Max out?"

"Yep.", Will agreed, laughing along with Dustin and Lucas, who apparently found the redhead's strong reaction hilarious.

"Alright, so that's settled.", Mike allowed with a roll of his eyes. "Max gets her strength back and can climb out of the deep pit by pure muscle power, because she's such a badass, or whatever."

"Don't you need to make sure the potion is working first, great big game master?", Max asked, sarcastically.

"Just shut up.", Lucas suggested, fighting back his laughter.

"Okay, so, while the enemy is getting closer, you are still tied to the wall close to the green door, El.", Mike said, turning towards her, and his voice lost a bit of its dark intensity, somehow. It became warmer, softer.

Or maybe she was just imagining that, who knew. El suddenly remembered a word she'd recently learned: *lightheaded*.

"I...", El started, quietly thinking while watching her friends look up at her, expectantly. "I grab the sword that Lucas threw at me, earlier, ... from the floor,... and ...- and I try to get rid of the bonds?"

Mike beamed, looking proud of her while he nodded. "Okay, yeah, sure! You can try that, El! Let's see if it works."

As Mike rolled the dice, El saw Max, Lucas and Dustin exchange knowing smirks at each other, but she chose not to focus on that. She was still way too happy about not having embarrassed herself during her turn, as it was.

Not that El was really embarrassed, whenever she made a mistake during one of her friends' games. Friends didn't laugh when things went wrong, at least not in a mean way. And there were just so many games, and all of them had different rules, and it's not like expressing herself like that had ever been her strongest suit, anyway.

Talking was still not as easy as listening, a million things and concepts about her friends lives were still confusing and new to El... But whenever she got things right, whenever she did succeed at something, it meant the world to her. Importantly, it meant a lot to

Hopper and Joyce and Dr. Owens, too. And to Mike. El loved when things she did right made him smile. It was even better than his normal smiles. Which were also fantastic.

"It's working!", Mike proclaimed, happily, and made some more notes on his pad, right when they heard his Mum call out from upstairs.

"Michael? It's getting late!", she said, slight annoyance ringing down the stairs from the floor above.

"Ughh.", Mike sighed, putting his writing things on the ground beneath his chair and getting up. "I'll be right back, guys! I'm sure if I talk to her, she'll still let us finish the game!"

Will yawned.

Dustin eyed him from the side, looking a little worried. "Oh, actually, Mike, I think we can call it a night and finish the game tomorrow, alright? We can all remember the plot and everything!"

Max nodded, looking relieved herself. "Yeah, that sounds good!"

"Oh. Er... alright, if you guys say so...", Mike agreed, slightly disappointed at their lack of enthusiasm for another half an hour of his planned adventures. Then again, Will was still not feeling all that great from their last real life "adventure" - if you could call *almost getting eaten by giant, demonic plant-monsters and having their dark-dimensional ghost roots live inside your body* an adventure. So early goodnights were rather common among their group these days.

It had been almost nine months since their destruction of the Mindflayer, and while Will got a lot of emotional healing, his body was still a little weak because of everything he'd had to live through. They all hoped he would fully recover over time...

"El, you ready?", Will asked, friendly, and she nodded, collecting everything she'd brought. It wasn't a lot,- just some paper, a few pens and a tiny package of apple juice she hadn't opened yet: the lemonade Mike had offered her right away instead had looked a lot more inviting. Hopper wasn't too fond of really sugary drinks,- he said that someone who was as crazy about Eggos as El was should at

least try to not consume the same huge amount of sugar in drinks, all the time, but then again El had seen him smoke and bite his nails, so what did he know about good behaviour? He and television couldn't *both* be right!

As she got ready to leave, she could feel Mike's eyes on her, and quickly flashed him a shy smile, lifting her left hand and waving quickly. They were merely a metre apart from each other, so the wave thing might have looked a bit silly, but then he also lifted his arm and waved back at her. Maybe it wasn't as silly, after all. It didn't look silly when *he* did it...

"Um... Goodnight, El.", Mike said, returning her smile.

"Night, Mike.", she happily answered, her quiet voice reminding them both on the first time she'd said that to him in exactly this room. Strange, how much had happened since then.

Mike's eyes suddenly looked a whole lot deeper, somehow. She quickly moved forward and lightly wrapped her arms around his neck, not stopping to think about who might be watching them. It was just a small hug, nothing big. Nothing shocking, nothing to tease them about. But as Mike's arms reluctantly let go of her again a moment later, she saw how flushed his face was, anyway...

It looked pretty.

She wasn't going to tell him that, though- Max had already explained to El that boys weren't really into that word, if you applied it to them. Oh well. She would still keep thinking it, El decided. Mike was *really* pretty.

She made her way to the back door of Mike's basement, turning around once more to find him still staring at her, and then she was walking through the dark, to Jonathan's car, and got in on the back seat.

"Hey, El!", Will's older brother greeted her. "How was your gaming night?"

"Fun.", El told him, feeling very good about the whole thing.

"That's nice. And Mrs Wheeler didn't see you at all today? She wouldn't have, right?"

El shook her head.

"Good.", Jonathan said, nodding. "I had a nice afternoon, too.", he then mentioned, and El thought that that was quite obvious from the way he was smiling. He always smiled after seeing Nancy, she'd noticed. Maybe Nancy was Jonathan's Mike?

She wasn't sure if that was even possible, but people liking Nancy definitely made sense to her. Nancy was so nice and pretty!

Normally, El never would have been allowed to visit Mike at home. Not ever. She was supposed to be hiding at the cabin, and while Hopper had been a lot more liberal about this stuff for the past few months, safety always came first. El could visit Will's place, and she could have friends over at their own cabin quite often, but apart from that? No visiting Dustin, no visiting Lucas and *"absolutely no visiting the Wheeler-boy, you understand, El? I'm serious here!"*

It made sense.

Mike's parents had worked together with Papa and the bad men. They might even recognise El from the photos they must have been shown! Mike's house wasn't the safest place for El just yet.

But right now, Holly was covered in chickenpox, and Mike's mum was way too worried about her little daughter as to pay a lot of attention to what was going on in her basement. Mrs Wheeler had spend the entire afternoon at the doctors with Holly and had probably only just arrived back home, anyway.

And normally, that little convenience would *never* have been enough to persuade a protective guy like Chief Hopper to lower his guard in any way.

But in less than two months, El would be in school with her friends as it was, and Hopper had come to the conclusion that the time was right to slowly introduce El to a few people in Hawkins, anyway. She couldn't just magically appear in school with the others, in

September. No, if the chief of police suddenly happened to have a daughter in town, it was probably better to get the matter over with during the summer holidays already.

"El's first weeks in school will be weird enough as it is! The least one could do is to get some of the attention off her back now already.", Joyce had currently suggested.

Hopper's colleagues had already met El, therefore. They seemed quite nice and very weird.

So, even if Mrs Wheeler, or any other parent of her friends, was to see her right now... It shouldn't be a catastrophe, right? Her hair was way longer, now... She *almost* had a normal vocabulary for a kid their age... And now that Max was within the little group, it wouldn't be too suspicious any longer if yet another girl was hanging out with Mike, Will, Lucas and Dustin. Right?

No one would know that El was El. She was Hopper's daughter now, and no one else,- no one who hadn't made the acquaintance of a Demodog yet,- would ever find out about her real identity. Right?

Jonathan flicked through different radio stations, apparently looking for the sort of music he liked best. Eleven could feel the static field, the blurry, grey noise in the back of her head... Being close to electric devices like this always quietly pulled at her brain, in a way. If she concentrated on it, she could fully dive into the black nothingness, to find people. But right now, she felt something else tuck at her attention frame, almost subconsciously. She focused on it and made the little wheel twitch under Jonathan's fingers.

The familiar melody immediately spread through the car, making Will laugh and Jonathan turn around in surprise.

"...If you say that you are mine, I'll be here 'til the end of time. So, you've got to let me know: Should I stay or should I go?..."

Jonathan shook his head in disbelief. "Okay, this is pretty practical.", he noted.

"You should have seen her open that jam jar last week, during our

picnic in Dustin's garden. That was practical!", Will grinned. El felt her cheeks get warm at their praise.

"Yeah, but that's not really an every-day issue for El, is it? Hopper is a grown man, he can open all sorts of tricky jams jars for her, I'm sure. But this?", he asked, pointing at the radio, "This is genius!"

El remembered that one time she'd helped Hopper find a *Jim Croce* song he loved on the radio, and how he'd reacted in a similar way as Jonathan. People really liked it when their favorite music was playing, El had noticed.

Their back story was simple: After years as a city cop and womanizer, Jim Hopper had now suddenly found out about an unknown child of his. The mother,- who should better not be mentioned in front of poor, fourteen-year old Jane, was nowadays not capable of taking care of her little girl any longer, and had therefore finally told the father, Jim, about his kid.

"It's not that hard to believe, Jim!", Joyce had said, smirking a bit. "Stuff like this happens every day, somewhere!"

"Well, it doesn't really portray me in the best possible light...", Hopper had grumbled.

"What, aren't you happy to be called her actual father? Everyone will look at you and say: *"Oh, look, it's Hopper, the Dad!"* Might be nice, don't you think?", she'd asked, the corners of her mouth twitching fondly.

Hopper had looked at El, who'd curiously eyed him over the edge of her book, and he had sighed and sort-of-smiled, too.

"Yeah, I suppose that's pretty helpful.", he'd mentioned, matter-of-factly, and Joyce had only snorted at his lame attempt to seem casual about it. He loved being a Dad again, that much was clear. It was good for him, too.

As Will, who had just noticed that he'd left his jacket inside, returned to the car, Jonathan saw the red haired girl being with him. Will opened the passenger door, sticking his head inside.

"Hey, Jonathan? Can we give Max a ride home?"

To El, he grinned and murmured; "Looks like Dustin's shield wasn't the only thing that broke tonight!"

El didn't understand what that meant, but Max was already getting in the back of the car, next to her, anyway.

"Oh, really funny. It's probably nothing, but I just didn't want to risk skating with a loose wheel when it's so dark outside... I'm gonna fix it tomorrow." She showed El the bottom of her skate board, and one of the wheels really did look a bit awkward, the way it almost fell off from it.

"Where do you live again, Max?", Jonathan asked, turning halfway around to look at his little brother's friend. Max was still focusing on the skate board in her lap. "You can drop El off, first, that's closer."

"Oh, great. Thanks for the advice.", Jonathan snorted, rolling his eyes, but starting the engine and driving down Squarestreet anyway, towards the Hopper cabin.

Nancy stood by the window and watched Jonathan drive off with the kids, feeling weirdly nostalgic, all of the sudden. Wasn't it weird how much they'd all grown up, Mike and his friends? Soon, she and Jonathan would be gone for college, and she'd have to leave Hawkins and so many memories behind... She'd sleep in a different bed, a different room... She'd meet new people and almost forget about some from home.

Growing up was scary, but mostly she was scared about what the future might bring *here*.

Sure, things were different, now that El had been back for some time and Will was getting better and better... Jonathan and his mum were not as anxious any more, Mike was his old self again... Things were looking good.

But then again, things had "looked good" already in the past, hadn't they?

Only last October, it had truly dawned on Nancy how twisted and fake her reality had been, and how the danger and the problems were not quite over yet. But before that? Before that Halloween week, everything had seemed quite alright, hadn't it? Before the anniversary of Barb's disappearance and all that had dawned closer, Nancy was oblivious to the fact that all the mess was in fact still RIGHT THERE. It was in front of her the whole time, somehow still lingering underneath a superficial layer of... something acceptable. The nice, average boyfriend, the annoying brother, the parties and the homework. Teenage "love" and worries about some distant, average future. Happiness, boredom, family dinners.

Nancy's life had been a joke for about a year, and then,- *oh, right, I lost my best friend to an alternative dimension, didn't I? I was hunting down monsters in order to save people? And now I'm drinking alcohol at parties with my boyfriend Steve, trying to act like it doesn't bother me that Barb's parents are going to spend their lives in agony and confusion?*

Nancy shook her head, still staring outside. She still thought about Steve quite a lot, actually. Not in a longing way – she was happy with Jonathan, and she knew that she'd never go back to her former boyfriend. But Nancy also had realised how silly she'd been for blaming him in any way.

Steve hadn't been quite as involved in the whole, weird upside-down thing,- at least not the first time around. He didn't feel quite as responsible for Barb or her parents or the whole Will drama.. And while that was something she'd used to judge him for, Nancy could now see that Steve had tried just as hard to keep a grasp on some sort of healthy reality as she had, last year. He'd just done it in a different way. He'd tried to keep the people he cared about close, away from harm and danger. Nancy hadn't. Nancy had done what she needed to do in order to protect herself: She'd given in to feelings that weren't quite real. Steve had been her anchor of normalcy.

And Jonathan?

Jonathan was who she'd talked to when *those other thoughts* had crept in. Whenever she couldn't bare the farce, and needed someone to truly understand what she was going through. If only for a minute.

And then she'd make a joke or say something casual, and Jonathan would smile and they were back to just being friends. Not each others life jacket. And Nancy would turn around and go look for Steve, to discuss an essay or a movie or some weekend plans with him.

Ridiculous.

So, if Nancy had somehow managed to trick herself for so long, how could she now be sure that *what she thought to be a safe place* wasn't going to turn into a gate to hell yet again, any time soon? How could Nancy possibly leave Hawkins without feeling scared for her family? Would she ever stop being scared, really? Would Jonathan ever stop being scared? Or Joyce, or Hopper?

It almost seemed like the kids were dealing better with the whole thing, than the grown-ups did. Funny, really, how a few years of age-difference could influence someone's entire perception of the world. The imagination that Mike and his friends had... it seemed to save them, in a way, from some brutal truths this earth had to offer.

"What are you thinking about?", Nancy heard her Mum ask, from behind her, and as she turned around she saw Karen Wheeler stand in the doorway of her bedroom.

"Hmm? Oh, nothing really.", Nancy mumbled, surprised by the question.

"You looked so deep in thought...", her Mum commented, smiling at her, but Nancy could see the tiny furrow above her brows start to deepen – that one wrinkle her Mum got when she was somehow suspicious or curious.

"I don't know.", Nancy replied, sitting on her bed with a sigh. "Mum, did you ever wonder what it would have been like to live in another town? Or city, or country? Just somewhere else than Hawkins?"

Her mother seemed perplex for a second before sitting down on her daughter's mattress, next to her. She looked thoughtful.

"Well, you know that I always wished I'd travelled more before marrying your Dad... But, then again, Hawkins has always been my

home, and I felt very loyal to my family and friends here... I guess it just wasn't really a priority for me, at the time."

She eyed her daughter, worriedly. "Dear, are you having second thoughts about your college application? I know New York seems interesting, but I'm sure if you are really upset about leaving Hawkins, Jonathan and you could arrange a long-distance thing, don't you think?"

Nancy shook her head, a smile tugging up her lips. "Mum, that's not what I meant. I really want to go to college with Jonathan.", She crossed her legs, touching the seam of her yellow-dotted socks in contemplation, "I just... I guess I feel a bit worried about...things here. How everyone or everything could change... I mean, I just don't want something to happen here without me even knowing..."

Her mum smiled at her, perplexed, "What sort of things, Nancy? You're always going to be home for important events, aren't you?"

Nancy sighed, frustrated. This was about as far as her opening up to her Mum could go, these days. Their parents frankly weren't aware of all the danger they'd already been in.

"I...- Mum, I just really don't want to miss out on something, okay? That's why I need you to always tell me about... everything... you know? Even the things that you don't think are important, okay? I just really want to know how everyone is doing, and what's going on. And if someone is acting weird, or anything... Tell me, please, okay?"

Karen Wheeler leaned forwards, moving closer to Nancy and wrapping her arms around the girl. "Of course, sweetie. Don't worry, it's perfectly normal to feel scared in situations like yours.. The first time away from home... Everyone is feeling a bit uneasy about that."

"Yes?", Nancy wondered, gently pressing her face against her Mum's shoulder.

"Sure, Nancy! When I moved out of your Grandparents' house for the first time, I was about your age, really! And I was so worried, you can't imagine. I thought about all the things that could possibly happen, how they could have an accident of some sorts, or just get

lonely with me being gone. But, at the end of the day, everyone has to face this sort of fear at one point or another. It's just a part of getting older, I think."

Nancy nodded slowly, noticing how her Mum's words were strangely similar to her own worries. And how they were actually helping her. Maybe you didn't have to be involved in some dark mystery or government conspiracies to understand basic human fears, after all...

"Thank you, Mum", Nancy mumbled, as her mother let go of her daughter and stood up. "That really made me feel better, I think."

Mrs Wheeler beamed, looking surprised at this reaction. "Oh, well... I'm glad I could help." She left the room, closing door behind her, oddly enough. And Nancy plucked her earphones into her walkman, her heart a lot lighter than before.

"So, basically, what you're saying is that this "Git-Sir-thing" is almost defeated, but you don't know if there's another monster behind the green door?", Hopper asked, trying hard to be interested, and taking another bite of mashed potatoes from his fork.

Eleven nodded. "But Mike says the Githzerai is not as dangerous as the enemy from last week. That's good.", she said. And then, as an afterthought, she added: "It's an im-prove-ment."

Hopper laughed, appreciatively. "Oh, really? Now that's nice. I always like it when things *improve*. And the opposite of that word is...?"

El creased her forehead. "Get worse?", she offered, looking hopeful.

He reached across the table, tousling her hair. "Yup. Good job, kid." He'd actually been looking for the word "decline", but now he realised that that was probably a bit much to ask for. Also, Hopper loved it when she looked proud of herself. His little girl really deserved all the support in the world.

"So, how about your word of the day? Do you still remember that, and can you tell me how to spell it?"

At that moment, the radio transceiver Eleven had gotten for

Christmas started to rumble in the corner. She blinked up at him, not moving.

Hopper sighed. "Alright, go for it kiddo. But only two minutes, you hear me?"

She nodded and beamed, jumping up from her seat right as the signal got stronger, revealing a voice.

"El?", the Wheeler-boy asked, and suddenly the sound was so clear and easy to understand that Hopper was certain El had used her powers on the device, "El, are you there?"

"Hi Mike.", she quickly replied, her tone the usual, soft half-sigh she'd sometimes fall into, particularly around him.

The other, more distinct sigh that came as an answer almost made Hopper roll his eyes. These kids really were something else.

"Hi! Do you...- do you have time to talk? Or are you guys still at dinner? I can call later, if you want!-"

"Dad says we have two minutes. But I can call you later, too?"

"Oh! Oh yes, sure, El! I just wanted to ask you if you'd like to try this new thing tomorrow perhaps, after we all finish the D&D game? It's called...-"

Hopper tried to focus on his food, instead of his daughter's conversation with her little boyfriend, mostly because their conversations weren't exactly interesting to him at this point.

A good meal, particularly one that involved Joyce' famous, slightly too watery mashed potatoes, *was* interesting, however. But Hopper also chose to focus on that word Eleven had just used so casually... Dad. It had started about two months ago, the whole Dad thing... And he'd be lying if he said it hadn't gotten his eyes a little wet, the first couple times he'd heard it. Jim Hopper had truly become a father yet again, hadn't he? And maybe a good one at that, too. He knew that he still had a lot to learn, but then again, so had El, right? Maybe they really could figure this whole thing out together, after all. He sure as hell knew that he wouldn't let anyone take her away from

him any time soon. They were a family now. A real family.

When Hopper had almost finished the majority of vegetables on his plate, he looked over at El. She was smiling so brightly, quietly listening to Mike's excited voice through the radio... But Hopper decided that their little chat had been long enough, for now.

"Hey, kiddo. We said two minutes, remember?"

El looked up, a bit startled perhaps. She mumbled something at the radio, and Mike replied: "Okay, alright! Talk to you later, bye El!"

"Bye Mike!"

Jeez. Look at that pleased little grin of hers, the chief thought, as soon as she sat back in front of him at the table. As far as Hopper knew, his own early teenage relationships hadn't been this intense. He'd barely been able to talk to girls back then, if he remembered correctly! And it's not even like he'd been a social outcast in the way that Will and his friends seemed to be.

Shaking his head, he carried on with his meal.

"Acquaintance." , El said, looking up at him.

"Huh?", he mumbled, distractedly.

"Acquaintance.", She repeated, matter-of-factly. "Word of the day. A-c-q-u-a-i-n-t-a-n-c-e. That's someone you know. Like a friend, but a bit different.", El explained.

Hopper chuckled. "Wow, didn't expect you to remember the right spelling, too. Acquaintance, that's a tough one!"

Eleven shrugged, smiling. "It's easy because it has a Q in it. Most words don't."

"What, and just because it has a Q in it, it's easier to remember than other words?", Hopper wondered.

El nodded, picking up some broccoli with her fork. She cringed as it passed her lips, but ate it without complaining. "Words with Qs are

the best words. It's like an O with a tie."

He laughed. "Aha. And what makes ties so important, if I may ask?"

Eleven blushed at that, for some reason. "Ties are pretty.", she replied, not quite meeting his eyes, and Hopper chose not to question her further. It didn't really matter, actually. He was fairly certain that any Q-containing word out there didn't stand a chance against some other words she knew, anyway. Like "Home". Or "Mike". Or "Eggos".

"Whatever you say, kiddo. Whatever you say."